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WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK AT A WAGED WORKPLACE OR WHAT IS TO

BE DONE WITH THE WAGE...

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PLACE: Maimonides Community Mental Health Center in Brooklyn, New York

-Maimonides Community Mental Health Center is part of a voluntary hospital. The Center was established by special monies from Federal, State, and city governments.

-Those who work at the Center are considered hospital workers, not government workers.

-Since we are hospital workers many of us (excluding psychiatrists, nurses, some administrators and executive secretaries) are in District 1199 which is a nationwide hospital employees' union.

-Even though we are in the same union as workers in Maimonides Hospital we are separated from hospital workers because we work in our own building or in neighborhood storefronts, we hold our own union meetings, we have our own administration which is different from the administration of the general hospital, and our budget is separate.

-The Center is "progressive" considering other institutions. It is run by old leftists and liberals. It considers itself to be innovative, many young people work here and experience a relative freedom not afforded at many other workplaces.

-Compared to other institutions of its kind, Maimonides Mental Health Center pays extremely high wages in each job category.

-Given this backdrop it sometimes seems hard to find out who the enemy is or even who the boss is (we're almost all on first name basis). The blackmail is more insidious at a place like ours where we are manipulated into believing "we have it good".

-The Center operates much like a family. The men are at the head of the family directing the mothers and the children. Currently all the administration are male in a field (helping professions) which is traditionally female; and they treat the women as either children or mothers depending upon where in the hierarchy one stands (social worker-secretary-food service).

SETTING:

-In the summer of '74 there was a major reorganization of all services. This reorganization opened up 12 new administrative or middle management jobs which were to be filled from within; since "we" had no extra money in the budget to hire new people.

-Some of these 12 positions had already been in existence by the mere fact that someone was carrying these responsibilities, but now a formal titled position was created with a wage increase in some cases.

-Both men and women applied for these jobs.

the selection committee which consisted of men only, hired 12 men to fill these jobs despite the fact that a number of women who applied were more qualified and had seniority.

-In addition some women who had been doing the jobs before the reorganization could not apply once the jobs were posted because of the unnecessary professional credentials now required of the person applying.

-Women began to meet to discuss the blatant sexism at the Center with regard to these twelve new positions.

-The union grievance machinery was put into motion since many of these positions if held by a former union member would remain in the union. If a non-union member got the job, then the job would not be a union position. This practice of allowing former union members, who move into administrative positions, to remain in the union is highly irregular, but nonetheless a precedent at the Center where many practices are different given the "progressive" nature of the place. Typically one would not find administrators in the union along with the line workers.

-In the Fall a small group of women decided to ask the Director if we could have one of his staff meetings to take up the issue of sexism in the Mental Health Center, and we would chair this meeting. This was granted to us.

-This meeting began a series of weekly meetings at the Center.

WHEN WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK BECOMES A PERSPECTIVE:

There were four of us committed to a Wages for Housework perspective at the Center. Through this struggle, two more women joined our Wages For Housework group. When this issue was brought to our attention we wanted to see how a Wages For Housework perspective would give form to this particular struggle. At first glance we knew that a demand which would put women in those twelve positions would be reformist and not deal with the bulk of women at our workplace. We began to make an analogy between the family where women's work is not recognized, unwaged, and connected to our femininity (thereby being our blackmail) and the similar position held by women as wage earners in the family at the Center. We realized that much of the work we do at the Center is unwaged, connected to our feminine role and that we are treated as housewives on the job. The Mental Health Center profits from this extended family situation by extracting more surplus labor from us women by not paying us for this work. This analysis was presented to the staff during various meetings.

We raised demands that would talk to all women and not just those few who might apply for those twelve positions. The women staff (with the support of a few men) demanded from administration a full day off with pay to hold a conference on Sexism in the Center. This day would be for all staff and would replace our normal day of work. The Center would be on minimal coverage for emergencies. The staff had the choice of working their regular job or attending the conference. A day with pay to organize for ourselves-a day with pay not to produce for capital, but to produce struggle.

We won this day and on Thursday December 5, 1974, 140 staff members, the bulk of whom were women, participated in a conference. There were four workshops which embodied much of the discussions of six weeks prior to the conference: Upgrading, Patient Care, Day Care and Legal Rights. We came to the conclusion to have these workshops after weeks of discussion and analyses concerning women's role at the waged work place, our relationship to our women patients, the need for day care and certain immediate legal actions we might take.

Many of the Wages for Housework women saw as our main focus the upgrading workshop since we felt that it was here that the Wages for Housework perspective spoke to the majority of non-professional women staff who make up the bulk of the Center's staff. We pointed out how upgrading is an illusion for it serves to keep women pitted against each other. Only a small proportion of workers can enter these upgrading programs and thereby move up. Those women who do move up the ladder are used to regulate and control other women with whom they work. Upgrading programs also give the illusion that you can make it in a "fair system".

It was in this workshop that we raised the demand of an end to unwaged work, wages for students, a fight for inversely proportional raises (whereby the wage differentials which benefit men who get the highest wages would be reversed....instead women who make up the bulk of low paid workers would begin to get a higher percentage of the wage increment), a possible job action where we would refuse to do work that we now do for nothing. (This would include everything not written in our job descriptions such as making the boss' coffee, serving him, acting as a public relations person when that isn't your job, etc.), a woman's watchdog committee to deal with grievances that women and men have because of the treatment we as well as men get when doing work associated with a woman's role. (This committee will have a majority of women and some men on it.) Equal vacation with pay for all employees (four weeks) and time and a half for overtime for all workers.

It is important to note that there was a heated debate in this workshop and at prior staff meetings on the role of the Union. It became clear much to the dislike of some union delegates, that the union was seen as an organization the which we would turn to get what we needed-when we needed it. But, if it tried to stop us we would not let that happen. Women spoke out saying in the past they raised certain issues i.e. need for pay increases, more vacation leave with the union, but they got nowhere. Women who were not in the union were concerned because the union doesn't consider you a worker if you are not a member of the union. Debate regarding the role of the union has come up over and over in this struggle and it seems evident that this is an autonomous struggle to the point that we will give direction to the union if we need them. Our meetings are kept separate from union meetings and at union meetings we invite non-union workers in by vote from all of us. The union grievance machinery has added seven women to the committee by decree of the workers to keep the delegates and union machinery working for us!!

The women in the Day Care Workshop made recommendations demanding twenty four hour day care for women employees of the hospital and the Mental Health Center. This would be paid for by the hospital and operate all day and evening since there are night workers as well as day workers who could benefit from this. An addition was made to this proposal, to include the children of volunteers and students who are unwaged workers in this institution, and if there is space community women who are at home with their children could make use of this service.

Legal Rights workshop set up a mechanism for pursuing the channels open to us to fight the discriminatory practices of the Center. This included hiring a woman lawyer, raising the funds, first from the Center staff, and filing briefs.

Out of the Wages for Housework analysis it became apparent that our women patients hold the lowest position in the hierarchy of this "family"...the Center. These women in effect are rebelling against their exploited position and their work. They come to us as patients and we offer them a speedy return to the position against which they rebelled in the guise of mental health services...unwaged work at home, or "upgrading" by joining the low waged work force. The Wages for Housework perspective helped us see the connection between us and our patients-between our exploitation at the Center and the exploitation of many of our patients. This perspective allowed one therapist to see the similarity between her own position in the Center and her patients. She therefore brought her women patients to the morning session of this conference.

out of this workshop came the beginning of a discussion about how to work differently with women and children, the need for a separate women's service. Finally most important proposal which acknowledged that many women (such as secretaries) function as therapeutic agents and they should no longer do this without getting recognition and pay.

At the end of the day, all the workshops joined together for a meeting to vote on all the proposals which were formulated in each workshop and to set up action committees to work on these proposals. At this time we posed to the staff that we should demand from administration two hours off with pay each week for any staff member who wishes to work on any committee. It will take a lot of work to implement and fight for these proposals and we refuse to do it on "our time" because "our time" is "their time and we're going to make them pay for it. This proposal was passed. *(see last page) In addition we will have a newsletter which will keep us informed of each committee's progress.

We also voted on and passed a motion to inform the workers in the hospital of what is going on at the Center. We will set up an information table at lunch time and distribute our newsletter to workers in the general hospital with the hope of spreading the struggle.

At the end of this day, a group of men were excited enough about the outcome of the conference to start a men's group. Prior to this day they had been very skeptical, but now saw their own self interest at stake.

Just as Marx is a tool to look at struggle, so is Wages for Housework perspective. As this struggle at Maimonides unfolds, for we are only beginning, we have come to value more and more the Wages for Housework perspective. This is a perspective that makes links where none seem possible. For example, if we had taken the route of only fighting for a reopening of those twelve positions so that women could take those jobs, we would have involved very few women. Most women can not, and will not ever be able to apply for those positions. However when we begin to talk about our work, and how much we do that is unwaged, and how our femininity is connected to that, we can begin to make an alliance where none seemed possible. Secretaries could speak out and talk about their problems and so could professional social workers and psychologists. There was a beginning sense of unity where before there was mistrust, jealousy and silence. We talked about the different privileges afforded us by the institution which divides us, e.g. "professionals" get four weeks vacation and "non-professionals" two to three weeks. We listened to all these differences and together made demands that would benefit all women. We shared vignettes with each other concerning how we're treated like housewives at work no matter where we are in the hierarchy.

Much energy and excitement has been created. Women are taking it upon themselves to do little works of sabotage. One secretary is refusing work that she considers not to be work that she should do even though she has been doing it for years. She refuses to get patients' charts for therapists and then search out a psychiatrist to fill out a prescription for these patients. She is not a therapist and will no longer be the handmaiden for the therapist. In my storefront the women are refusing to do the typing for the men, make the coffee and clean. An executive secretary walked off the job the other day to have an interview for school and insists on getting paid for this time away from her desk. Certain staff members are filling out their time cards so as to include lunch as a paid hour since we realize that most of the time we eat at our desk and produce for them during our lunch hour. One woman has told an administrator that she will no longer do his secretarial work because her other boss pays her for one job and gives her work for two and one half people, therefore she refuses to take on his work as well. Women have come to meeting many times in direct defiance of their bosses who tell them not to take a lunch hour after our meetings. Our meetings until now have been held during lunch hour. These are individual acts and they go on every day now. There is also a spirit of power that has come out of this full day conference. When women begin to come together there

is strength and it has just begun to show itself here at Maimonides. We have just begun and there is no telling where we will go.

*At the time of this writing we have won a major victory. Two hours of work with pay for all staff members to work on any committee except for Legal and Fund Raising committees. The Director of the Center will not pay us to raise funds to take legal action against him. He figures the committees probably are safer for him. He doesn't recognize the power we insist on building and not through legal channels. Another development has been the reopening of eleven of the twelve jobs. What this means exactly is still up in debate. At a future writing we will discuss this development and others.